Suspension in Reality

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Space 1999 Special!

R.A.M. E.V.A. A.O.K!

Garden Place, May 21, 1999 - The Association of Autonomous Astronauts Aotearoa today successfully tested a Readily Available Materials (RAM) spacesuit during an Earthwalk on Garden Place by Cosmorade Mark Servian. Two previous efforts had been set back by unfavourable surface conditions. But this time around the proud Black, White and Hologram of the Stars and Stripes was planted in the ground of another world and Sol 3 (née Terra) was claimed by the peace-loving Autonomous Space of the Universe (A.S.U.).

However the action was not without controversy. One startled spectator, obviously visiting from some hegemony or other, confronted the stilt walking spaceman and demanded to know "why is my flag all black?" She seemed unimpressed by the pseudo-advanced nature of the event and had to be quietly guided away by ground-level staff.

The Earthwalk featured all the usual aspects of interplanetary visits. A selection of carefully constructed and important looking junk bought from elsewhere was set up and as much surface litter as possible was collected and taken home for analysis. Without the distraction of actual meaning all stylistic aspects of previous landings (mainly on the so-called 'Moon') were successfully carried out.

The Spacesuit itself is a spangly number. Its white and hologram material is highlighted by purple sparkly 'eyelash' fabric and a variety of shiny metal accoutrements. As a stilt costume it allows the wearer to float serenely above the surface in total stylishness.

"Several small constant steps for a man, no particular leap for mankind." The AAA's five-year plan continues aspace!

The Political Economy of Community-Based Space Exploration

Sam Buchanan

Exponents of community-based space programmes often become obsessive about developing the necessary technology to get off the planet. This is understandable given the undeniable sexual appeal of even government developed and built spacecraft. However, the major hurdle for such projects, at least in the near future, is economic.

Obviously the technology is not a problem. We can easily do better than the B-grade space junk used by NASA to get to the moon or Russia's charmingly unsophisticated Soyuz craft that still potter about Earth's orbit in a way reminiscent of the lumbering DC-3 Dakotas still seen in the sky from time to time. (Interestingly the designer of the DC-3, the most successful civil aircraft of the 1930s, went on to work on the US space programme in its early days).

While technology will one day make space rockets as affordable as a small family car, that day is unlikely to be seen in the lifetimes of many of us. For the moment, space travel is going to be a costly luxury but that doesn't mean it has to be out of reach. State capitalism, the political system responsible for both the US and Soviet space programmes, is often reviled by economists and rightly so. Generally it is a hopeless wealth-destroying system, but it has one strong point - it's ability to concentrate large quantities of capital in a single place for a single purpose.

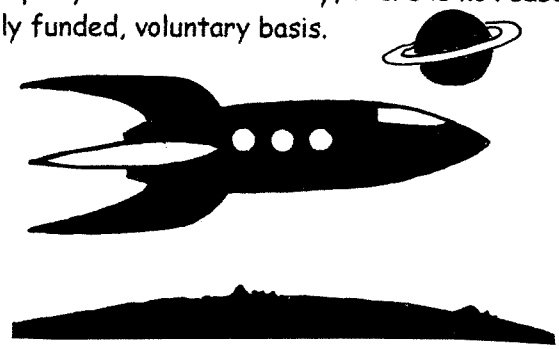
By legalising theft, tax dollars, (roubles or whatever) are extorted from the poor under threat of imprisonment by an inefficient, but colossal, state bureaucracy. These funds are then routed to whatever purpose the state desires, in this case constructed devices such as the Saturn V booster, which required as much as 10,000 person-years of labour to construct. This expenditure was justified in the US by appealing to national pride, using the unconvincing argument that a lead in the space race demonstrated the superiority of US social organisation over that of the Soviets (by the same argument India or China is demonstrably superior to many western countries). A few wacky and inaccurate claims about improving frying pans were thrown in for good measure. The Soviets never really needed to justify themselves, for them it was all just good sport.

Community space programmes will be unable to fund themselves by theft. Sausage sizzles and cake stalls will obviously bring in a good wad of dosh, as will lotteries with seats on moon rockets as prizes, but the ultimate funding will have to come from public subscriptions.

This raises another issue -- how can a willingness by the public to support a space programme from which they see no immediate benefit be maintained? The answer seems to be something the US government is only now beginning to realise. The public was never convinced by their idiotic justifications for wasting money in space; the public's main interest in space programmes is in their capacity to entertain. The recent US Mars mission made this clear with the rover making numerous televised appearances in which it dutifully bumped into rocks for the sake of the camera. The Challenger Shuttle explosion also attracted considerable audiences.

The real winner in the 'space-as-a-soap-opera' game has been Mir. While US shuttle missions have usually run like clockwork (i.e. boring), Mir has gone from crisis to crisis for years. Unlike the US Skylab that fell to pieces and crashed in a couple of years, Mir has staggered on from season to season. Whenever you think its time is finally up, its length of service is extended yet again. Just as its all getting a bit dull, something fails and good old Russian know-how and a `can do' attitude turns up to save the day. Mir movies (especially *Out of the Present*) have been real crackers, and Russian spacesuits are sexier than US models.

We have a lot to learn from Mir. Don't do anything too well or too slick. Design spacecraft with bits that fall off from time to time. Keep the tension high, never fix anything until the last possible second and make sure there is always some threat lurking in the background to keep the audience coming back. Properly handled in this way, there is no reason why a space programme cannot be run on a publicly funded, voluntary basis.



{Heading in Extraneous Directions} [from Ruth Irwin]

The trouble with a Noam Chomsky like reading of 'capitalism' is that the thriller novel, or the media, or military space programmes, are *designing* fake leads. Furthermore, the assumption is that (evil?) technology will continue to progress, ever expanding the frontiers in such forms as Martian terra-forming, genetic engineering, etc. These are modern assumptions that history will continue to progress, whether it is towards Utopia or Armageddon depends on your viewpoint. Of course the thing is, change will continually flux, but there is no universal reason to believe that technology isn't nearing its own use-by date. Perhaps we are the last generation to live in such 'progressive' times.

Anyway I am delighted with the AAA because it is heading in extraneous directions. Risking unknown fates is to generate alternatives to nihilism. Yahoo!

S P A C E 1 9 9 9

is a 10 day event being organised by the Association of Autonomous Astronauts in London from June 18-27. Visit www.deepdisc.com/space1999 for details. Barry Bryant will be representing AAA Aotearoa with a paper to the technology seminar entitled "Towards an Everythingisation of Stuff: Pasifikan Strategies for Radical Emigration".

Suspension in Reality is published by The Association of Autonomous Astronauts - Aotearoa, C/- Mark Servian, 5 Baffles Cres, Silverdale, Hamilton, New Zealand. 0064 7 856 3114. Mark@oldfarm.co.nz. To subscribe or to support our space program send us something appropriate. Contact us for links to other AAA groups and for copies of their zines. For a direct line to the crux of the matter contact Raido AAA via AAA@uncarved.demon.co.uk or BM Box 3641, London WC1N 3XX, United Kingdom.

A Family Outing to the Moon and Back

by Paul Smith.

It was somewhat ordinary but quite unnerving, especially if you got too close to the steam vents. They hissed as you walked by, an orchestra of a thousand singing teapots - boiling that is. The farty smell was not off putting, I don't mind it at all, but then my dad lives in Rotorua.

Sweet sulphur stains the clay soil. Previous explosions formed large craters giving the area its name - Craters of the Moon.

There is a raised wooden walkway for sightseers and larger platforms so we could have a gander into the craters. Even better views could be gained behind the "Danger, Unstable Ground" sign. Numerous people risk their lives every day just to take a peek at what they could safely see a little further along the walkway.

The most exciting craters had ponds of boiling mud plopping away like porridge on a cool winter's morning. But just as good was sitting on the park bench watching people disappear into the drifting clouds of steam.

Why wait until space travel to the moon is available to the humanoid on the street when you can go to Craters of the Moon just out of Taupo any day you like! And it's free! I only wish I had had some popcorn kernels to stick down some of the steam vents.